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## Alles over de ontwikkeling. Over de grondslagen van de ontwikkelingspsychologie

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*On the foundations of developmental psychology*

Every scientific discipline claims a specific domain of knowledge. Developmental psychology was and is strongly identified with child psychology and is expected to have practical relevance for handling and solving everyday questions concerning developmental disorders, childrearing, education, etc. According to Wohlwill, up to the fifties, developmental psychology was 'by and large either clinically oriented, with dominant interests in problems of personality development, or concerned with purely practical aspects of child behaviour'. However, today most developmental psychologists have little to say about the development or developmental problems of a particular child and will show some reluctance when asked to do so.

When knowledge about children is not the most characteristic feature of developmental psychology, what could it be that developmental psychologists are knowledgeable about? To give a straightforward and somewhat bold answer one could say that they know *everything about development*, that is, they have knowledge about developmental processes and changes, the conditions that make development possible or facilitate development, the constraints on development, and so on. One would expect developmental psychologists to be able to give a clear answer to the question *what is development?*. This study shows that it is rather difficult to formulate an unambiguous answer.

The knowledge contained in *classic developmental psychology*, as this book calls it, is of a very special kind and gives a rather narrow, if not limited perspective on developmental change. This book aims at clarifying the background of this particular limitation and will propose a broader, more open perspective on developmental processes. This involves going deeper into the foundations of developmental psychology, that is, to the conceptualisation of development in developmental theories and models.

The first three chapters present a general discussion of the foundations of developmental psychology. The first chapter introduces the central purpose of the investigation: the description and analysis of the structure of developmental models. To make such a description and analysis possible, three main foundational questions are proposed. The first question aims at specifying the *levels of generalization* of developmental models. Psychological development refers to the ontogenetic level in the first place, but the explanation of developmental processes

involves also the phylogenetic, anthropological levels. The second question specifies the task of developmental psychology: what are the psychological states that develop through in their development, and what are the transitions from one state to another. The third question is called *problems in the description of development*, and it concerns the relationship between development and the environment, the differentiation between the different levels of development, and the respective conceptualisations of developmental processes for the study of developmental models.

Most models in classic developmental theories of Piaget, Kohlberg and Freud, provide a conceptualisation of development, in which the perspective of the final state of development is the starting point, with mental stages leading to that final state. A re-conceptualisation of development as a unilinear and unidirectional process, with a limited amount of interindividual and interstage variability, is rejected. The assumption is that all individuals follow different trajectories in their development. In this perspective, the final state of development is not the starting point, but the result of a process.

Contrary to the retrospective conceptualisation (looking back) of development, a prospective conceptualisation (looking forward) of development starts at a starting point in the description of development, a fixed order of developmental stages is necessary. A prospective conceptualisation leaves the chance on the developmental process and development as a process that is at least in part open. There is no established tradition of prospective conceptualisation. The study tries to make clear how a prospective conceptualisation can help to the understanding of developmental processes.

The second chapter gives a more detailed generalisation. In the description and explanation of developmental psychology has relied heavily on evolution, in particular, has been prominent of developmental psychology as a science. Darwin and psychological development of both the concept of development and its alternative (ideological) assumptions about the role of development in determining the theory of psychology. The third chapter argues for a better understanding of the theory of development and its founding fathers, and tries to explain the role of development in our explanation of ontogenetic change.

## Developmental psychology

a specific domain of knowledge, strongly identified with child psychology for handling and solving everyday disorders, childrearing, education, etc. developmental psychology was 'by and by' and 'in' interests in problems of personality, purely practical aspects of child behaviour. developmental psychologists have little to say about problems of a particular child and will do so.

It is not the most characteristic feature of it that developmental psychologists might forward and somewhat bold answer 'What is development?', that is, they have processes and changes, the conditions that development, the constraints on developmental psychologists to be able to answer 'What is development?'. This study shows that the answer is ambiguous.

Classic developmental psychology, as this book is, is a rather narrow, if not limited perspective. This book aims at clarifying the background of developmental psychology and to give a broader, more open perspective on developmental psychology by going deeper into the foundations of developmental psychology and the conceptualisation of development in developmental psychology.

This discussion of the foundations of developmental psychology introduces the central purpose of the book. It is of the structure of developmental psychology, if possible, three main foundational questions are addressed. The first question aims at specifying the levels of generalisation in developmental psychology. The second question refers to the ontogenetic explanation of developmental processes.

involves also the phylogenetic, anthropogenetic, sociogenetic and microgenetic levels. The second question specifies the two main features of developmental psychology: what are the psychological *states or stages* which individuals pass through in their development, and which *mechanisms* are responsible for the transition from one state to another. The third question has to do with what are called *problems in the description of development*. These problems are associated with the relationship between development and context, the direction and goal of development, and the differentiation between so called retrospective and prospective conceptualisations of development. This differentiation is of importance for the study of developmental models.

Most models in classic developmental psychology, associated with the theories of Piaget, Kohlberg and Freud, provide a *retrospective* (backward looking) conceptualisation of development, in which development is described from the perspective of the final state of development, as a sequence of specific developmental stages leading to that final state. A retrospective conceptualisation describes development as a unilinear and unidirectional process and as such permits only a limited amount of interindividual and intercultural variation in developmental trajectories. The assumption is that all individuals will follow the same sequence of stages in their development. In this perspective, development is a closed process.

Contrary to the retrospective conceptualisation is the *prospective* (forward looking) conceptualisation of development. Here the initial state forms the starting point in the description of development. In the prospective conceptualisation, a fixed order of developmental stages and sequences is by no means necessary. A prospective conceptualisation leaves more room for the influence of chance on the developmental process and as a consequence defines development as a process that is at least in part open and unpredictable. Although there is no established tradition of prospective conceptualisations of development, this study tries to make clear how a prospective orientation can be fruitful for the understanding of developmental processes.

The second chapter gives a more detailed discussion of the various levels of generalisation. In the description and explanation of ontogenetic change, developmental psychology has relied heavily upon biological theory and has therefore chosen the phylogenetic level of generalisation. Darwin's theory of evolution, in particular, has been promulgated as starting point and foundation of developmental psychology as a scientific discipline. This link between Darwin and psychological development represents a rather narrow interpretation of both the concept of development and Darwinian biology. It regards normative (ideological) assumptions about the ideal course of development as implicitly determining the theory of psychological development. This chapter argues for a better understanding of the history of developmental psychology and its founding fathers, and tries to explain *why* we use the concept of development in our explanation of ontogenetic change.

The third chapter presents an overview and analysis of the different conceptualisations and uses of the term *development* in everyday and theoretical contexts. It also discusses in more detail the two main features of developmental psychology (stages and mechanisms of development) as formulated under the second core question in chapter one. The difficulty of answering the question *what is development?*, is illustrated with an investigation of the opinion of experts on the meaning of *development*. When it comes to defining the practical and theoretical meaning of development, experts show a striking lack of consensus.

After these three introductory chapters, the following two chapters elaborate on the foundational questions, exemplified in the analysis of two general models of development: life-span developmental psychology and the developmental theory of Heinz Werner. As stated earlier, while no established tradition exists within the prospective conceptualization of development, it was anticipated that the two general models might lend themselves to such a conceptualisation.

In the fourth chapter the consequences of a life-span approach to development are discussed and this approach is contrasted with classic developmental psychology. One of the main features of classic developmental psychology, strongly associated with the work of Piaget, lies in the central role of the final state in the (retrospective) description of development. According to the life-span developmental approach, development is a life-long process in which individuals show a large amount of variation in their developmental trajectories. This makes development at least in part unpredictable and also makes it difficult to specify a general final state. Life-span developmental psychology might profit from a more prospectively oriented conceptualisation of development. The chapter tries to relate the prospective conceptualisation to the role individuals themselves play in the construction of their development.

The fifth chapter presents an analysis of the developmental theory of Heinz Werner. In comparison with Piaget's, the work of Werner has not had a major impact on developmental thinking and in some sense it has been overshadowed by the work of the former. Nevertheless, Werner's work is a developmental theory *par excellence*. Werner sought to apply developmental conceptualisation not only to all phases of the life-span, but also to biological, cultural, pathological and neurological phenomena. That is, he applied the notion of development to all levels of generalisation. For Werner, development is not of a *natural kind*, a process which really exists in the individual, in history, etc., but a heuristic concept that enables one to study phenomena of change in terms of development. In cooperation with Bernard Kaplan he formulated a principle of development, called the *orthogenetic principle*, which states that 'wherever development occurs, it proceeds from a state of relative lack of differentiation to a state of increasing differentiation, articulation, and hierarchic integration'. This principle is defined

independent of a specific level of generalisation retrospectively organised, in terms of a fixed order terminated by the final state. The global initial state is a description of development. In addition to this, the chapter also tries to make clear how the work of Werner is related to temporary developmental thinking. The metaphor rises the orthogenetic principle.

The sixth chapter can be seen as an introduction to a specific domain of development: magic. In general it follows the procedure of the previous chapters by going one step further by proposing a theoretical framework for a prospectively oriented approach to development: a process in which there is no fixed order of developmental stages, but a global initial state which is taken as the starting point for development. The chosen domains are related to the process of symbolisation and have consequently not attracted much attention in developmental psychology. In fact, in the early days of developmental psychology, developmental psychologists were interested in the understanding of the dreaming process, the dream was reduced to the question what the child stands for. The phenomena were seen as (irrational) cognitive capacity. In this chapter it is stated that the obstacles which arise in the development towards a final state are important in themselves. Their development is not a straight line with a definite final state; they lack a clear function. For that reason they are characterised as magic.

The seventh chapter discusses the apparent decline of magic in the history of western civilisation the everyday meaning of magic has been overshadowed in favor of rationalised conceptions of reality. Magical thinking has been overruled by reason. However, magic has not disappeared completely. In the first place, the theory of magic is defined as magical, and secondly, also in adults we find magical thinking. Selma Fraiberg gives a description of the magical thinking on the theories of Freud and Piaget. With the theory of magic respectively as a final state description, the development is characterised as a process of rationalisation. These theories of magical thinking in adults, other than in the form of magical thinking. The theory of Werner is employed in order to show that magical thinking can be conceived of as a more or less rationalised process which might be of importance in the (esthetic) interpretation of magic. The chapter further tries to outline the structure of magic by

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independent of a specific level of generalisation or time-scale. Moreover, it is not retrospectively organised, in terms of a fixed order of developmental states, determined by the final state. The global initial state forms the starting point in the description of development. In addition to presenting an analysis, this chapter also tries to make clear how the work of Werner may be relevant for contemporary developmental thinking. The metaphor of the *fractal* is used to characterise the orthogenetic principle.

The sixth chapter can be seen as an introduction to three chapters each of which concerns a specific domain of development: magical thinking, dreaming and artistry. In general it follows the procedure of the foregoing chapters, but it tries to go one step further by proposing a theoretical framework for an open, prospectively oriented approach to development: an approach to development in which there is no fixed order of developmental states, no fixed final state and in which a global initial state is taken as the starting point for the description of development. The chosen domains are related to the topics of imagination and symbolisation and have consequently not attracted much attention in classic developmental psychology. In fact, in the early decades of the twentieth century, developmental psychologists were interested in magical thinking, the child's understanding of the dreaming process, the drawings of children, but their interest boiled down to the question what the child can or cannot do and understand. The phenomena were seen as (irrational) symptoms of the child's limited cognitive capacity. In this chapter it is stated that these phenomena are not just obstacles which arise in the development towards rational functioning, but that they are important in themselves. Their development does not follow a prescribed route with a definite final state; they lack an unambiguous psychological function. For that reason they are characterised as *purposeless structures*.

The seventh chapter discusses the apparent decline of the magical world. In the history of western civilisation the everyday meaning of magic has been diminished in favor of rationalised conceptions of reality. One could conclude that magical thinking has been overruled by reason. However, magical thinking has not disappeared completely. In the first place, the thinking of children can be classified as magical, and secondly, also in adults we may find traces of magical thinking. Selma Fraiberg gives a description of the magical world of the child, based on the theories of Freud and Piaget. With the reality principle or formal thinking respectively as a final state description, the development of the child is characterised as a process of rationalisation. These theories can hardly account for magical thinking in adults, other than in the form of pathological, irrational thinking. The theory of Werner is employed in order to make clear that magical thinking can be conceived of as a more or less autonomous way of thinking, which might be of importance in the (esthetic) imagination of adults. This chapter further tries to outline *the structure of magic* by going into the relationship be-

tween magic, reason and emotion, and discusses the relationship between cultural history and ontogenetic development of (magical) thinking.

Chapter eight defends and elaborates the standpoint that dreaming as a mental process with a meaningful content, is mediated by the social and cultural context in which dreaming takes place. On the one hand, dreaming may not be reduced to a strictly internal mental process, in the fashion attempted by Freud; on the other, dreaming is not the mere neurophysiological activity during REM sleep, suggesting that the dream is a meaningless reflex of the sleeping brain. Dreaming as symbolic activity is an interindividual and sociocultural process which starts with the words *I dreamt*. Children are introduced to this symbolic activity when they recall a night-time experience and are told that they were dreaming. It is stated that from this point of view it is senseless to say that someone who did not remember a dream *dreams*, even if we know that waking individuals during their REM sleep period will almost always result in the recall of a dream experience. The chapter tries to make clear that dreaming and the development of dreaming is an open process, strongly influenced by the specific properties of the dreamer's context.

The ninth chapter takes as its starting point the significant resemblances between the drawings of children and the artistic products of adult artists. Developmental psychologists and contemporary artists seem to be aware of this resemblance. However, *children's art* is not appreciated as an autonomous product but rather as a specific and particular symptom of children's behaviour. On the one hand children's drawings seem to have some artistic value, on the other, this value is seen as a symptom of children's development, its preformal level of cognitive functioning. This chapter specifies how a prospective conceptualisation of development can shed light on the topic of artistic development. It explains what is meant when one speaks of *children's art* and *the child as artist* and makes clear that our understanding and appreciation of the artistic products of children is related to cultural history in general and art history in particular.

The final chapter is an epilogue and recapitulates the general aims and conclusions of this study. It underlines the importance of insight and reflection on the foundations of developmental thinking and repeats that we should not stick to the question *what is development?* but should also give an account of the question *why development?*, by making explicit the underlying normative and ideological assumptions in the conceptualisation of development. It is stated that a more open, prospective conceptualisation of development does not mean that we must ban all normative and ideological thinking in developmental psychology: such a conceptualisation gives room for a critical reflection upon the normative aspects in theory building. Whatever the outcome of this reflection may be, it will hardly be ever possible to know everything about development.

## I Een proeve van het ongetemde voortgangdenken Inleiding

### 1.1 Een ontgoocheling?

De grondslagen van de wetenschappelijke ontwikkelingspsychologie, zoals die in de tweede helfte van de twintigste eeuw is opgekomen, vertonen duidelijke sporen van de overgang van het negentiende eeuwse denken in termen van ontwikkeling naar het twintigste eeuwse denken. Het gaat om een ontwikkeling die heeft, in een zo algemeen gebruikte zin, te maken met de ontdekking op veranderingen in gedrag over tijd. Het gaat om de ontdekking van een vensloop of een deel daarvan (Wohlwill 1983: 10). Het gaat om de ontdekking niet om verandering zonder meer, maar om verandering in een bepaalde richting, en ten tweede om de ontdekking dat de veranderingen derstellen, hetzij als resultaat van interne processen, hetzij als resultaat van een soort natuurlijke drang die eigen zou zijn aan het individu, het produkt van doelbewust ingrijpen door de omgeving. Waar de oorzaken van die veranderingen liggen, dat is de vraag. De verwachting is dat ze resulteren in een hogere vorm van ontwikkeling.

Bernard Kaplan (1983a) heeft een zeer interessante bijdrage aan de aard van dat hoger niveau van functioneren gemaakt. Hij spreekt van ontwikkelingspsychologie als de discipline die zich bezigt op de 'perfection of the individual' (p. 188). De ontwikkeling van het individu, bij of zou moeten bijdragen aan deze perfectie. Het gaat om thema's als zelfactualisatie, zelfrealisatie, 'zelfvrijding' van het individu. Als we echter de hoofdstromingen in de ontwikkelingspsychologie van de twintigste eeuw in deze typering houden, moeten we constateren dat de perfectie van het individu in de twintigste eeuwse ontwikkelingspsychologie steeds meer is generationaliseerd en dat de perfectie van het individu een schele kantjes is ontdaan (we zullen in het volgende hoofdstuk zien dat het niet volledig is verdwenen).